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ABSTRACT

This speech describes the services ideally provided by an evaluation department, gives examples of actual services, outlines problems that evaluation departments face in delivering these services, and discusses the level of funding necessary to provide services required by both the community and the U.S. Office of Education. According to the report, departments of evaluation should, ideally, delineate, obtain, and disseminate information useful for making educational decisions. (Author/JF)

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THE PURPOSE AND PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL DEPARTMENTS OF EVALUATION

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by

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THE PURPOSE AND PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL DEPARTMENTS OF EVALUATION

(The problems they incur, and the necessary level of funding to provide the services required by the community and the U.S. Office of Education)

Introduction

This paper first describes the services ideally provided by an evaluation department, with examples given of actual services, a description of the problems which evaluation departments incur in delivering these services, and finally, a discussion of, and proposal for the necessary level of funding to provide services which are required by both community and U.S. Office of Education.

Services Provided

The ideal service goal of a department of evaluation can be formulated from the Phi Delta Kappa National Commission on Evaluation definition of educational evaluation: to delineate, obtain and provide useful information for making educational decisions. The institution in which I work, the Columbus, Ohio Public Schools, has developed goals for each of its administrative divisions. Those which were specified for the division in which the evaluation department operates are as follows:

1. To contribute to the improvement of the program, services, operation and administration of the Columbus Public Schools who are producing and reporting factual information.

2. To contribute to the improvement of communication between and among all individuals and groups in the educational community of Columbus, including the Board of Education, employees of the Board, pupils, parents, and citizens who manifest an interest in school affairs.

3. To help the Board of Education and school administration account to pupils, parents, and the citizens of Columbus

for the performance of the entire school system and groups of pupils.

4. To create, maintain, and improve opportunities for pupils, parents, and the citizens of Columbus to have broader and more meaningful involvement in school affairs.

5. To reflect the opinion and attitudes of pupils, parents, and the citizens of Columbus about school affairs to the Board of Education and school administration.

6. To reinforce and service the specific evaluation and information needs of all other divisions, departments and schools in the Columbus City School District.

These goals were developed to be indicative of the thrust and contribution which the Evaluation Department can make to the improvement of education in Columbus. These goals have been translated into areas of service. The areas of service which specifically relate to evaluation are as follows:

1. Evaluation and accountability.--This area of service can be broken into three basic activities. One activity is the development of evaluation and accountability systems. The evaluation office has the responsibility for working with groups of decision-makers and other affected personnel to develop systems which will permit the evaluation of, and accountability for specific functions and activities of a department, division or program. One such example is the development of a teacher appraisal system which has been put into use by the school system and has undergone one year of operation at this point. Another such system was an accountability system for evaluating building environment. Teachers, on a building-by-building basis, annually respond to an instrument to assess the professional environment of their building on several areas. The responsibility of the evaluation officer in developing these systems

is to utilize evaluation technology in the development of the system, pilot test the system which has been developed, iron out the bugs, develop manuals or other training materials, and turn over the system to an appropriate manager or administrator. The evaluation office then has the responsibility for monitoring the operation of the system and for revising the system as necessary.

A second major area is that of context evaluation. For purposes of convenience, context evaluation has been broken into five major areas. Those areas include achievement data, information on staff, program information, surveys, and community involvement procedures.

The third activity of the evaluation and accountability section deals with input, process, and product evaluation--those ad hoc evaluation activities which take place after a problem has been identified, a priority assigned to its solution, and action taken to design a solution, implement it, and test it.

2. Compensatory education service.--A second major service area is that of compensatory education service, which is to provide process and product evaluation service to funded projects such as Title I, ESEA and our State Disadvantaged Pupil programs, as well as Model Cities projects and other funded projects, including Title III programs. The Compensatory Education Service Unit utilizes the context data available to them from the evaluation and accountability section.

3. Field Services Unit.--A third major area of services is that of Field Services. The concept of the Field Services Unit developed from the need to be able to respond to problems at the local building level.

The primary functions of the Field Services Unit are to deliver the expertise of the evaluation office to the field, to provide training and consultating services as well as limited, direct service to the faculty, principal, parents and students of a local school. One major product that we have worked on in this area has been the development of a process for the evaluation of elementary schools on a school-by-school basis involving faculty, parents, and students. This grew out of the recently established State Minimum Standards for Elementary Schools in Ohio, and the need to develop a practical evaluation instrument and procedure which could be used and be useful.

Delineating, Obtaining and Providing Information

As you may have noted in the definition of evaluation given previously, the three major activities of delineating, obtaining, and providing are performed by the evaluator in relation to decision-makers in the school system. The evaluator has the responsibility for delineating information needs with school system decision-makers from board members to teachers, for delineating information needs of the community and for providing a meaningful interface between these many and disparate needs. The evaluation office then performs the function of obtaining the information, from extant records, or by collecting new information when necessary, putting the information into meaningful form which relates to the decisions to be made, and finally, reporting this information to the appropriate audiences. Our decision-makers include students, parents, teachers, building principals, board members, etc. In the case of federally funded projects or state funded projects, our decision-makers include the State Department of Education and various U.S.

Office of Education departments or divisions. It has become apparent that not all decision-makers require the same information nor do they require information in the same form because decisions at different levels are different. However, it is important to our school system that funding sources receive information about programs and projects which have been funded. It is also important to local decision-makers, whether they be program directors or community people, to have information which may not be the same as that which has been provided through the typical reporting system to the State Department or the U.S. Office. In fact, in most cases the decisions made at the local level in the community, in the school, and in the program may be more important to the life of the program and to the success of the program than those decisions which are made at other levels. Consequently, it is necessary to provide a level of support which will enable the evaluation office to be responsive to local decision-making information means, as well as to meet the mandated reporting requirements of funding sources.

Problems Departments of Evaluation Incur

Some basic problem areas of evaluation offices are: credibility, threat, personnel and limited resources. A discussion of each of these problem areas follows with suggested remedies to each.

Credibility.--Because it must be responsive to many audiences, the evaluation office must develop and maintain credibility with each of these audiences. The evaluation office within a school system faces the problem of being too closely identified with any one group in the system. For example, it could be seen as an arm of the administrator, whether they are in the field or central office. In other systems, it could be seen as an

arm of the teachers. It is important to dispel these notions and maintain the image of being responsive to all audiences in a credible manner. How is this to be done? First, and perhaps most important, evaluation reports must be objective. Second, the process used for evaluation must be open to scrutiny--must be public by all parties concerned. One route being promoted to establish credibility of evaluation activities is the use of external auditors. Certainly this also has potential for establishing credibility. The evaluation office can also be the holder of the "good housekeeping seal of approval" for evaluations performed by other departments, schools or programs in the school system. In other words, within the system, the office could serve as the external auditor for other evaluations.

Threat.--This simple word represents a major concern which the word evaluate generally raises among professionals, teachers and administrators alike. Establishing objectivity and demonstrating fairness and equity to all who are involved in evaluation is one sure way of removing the threatening connotation of evaluation. It has been suggested that a "bill of rights" be established--to cover the rights of both the evaluator and the evaluatee.

Personnel.--The evaluation office must have competent personnel. It is important to recruit, train and maintain the personnel necessary to perform a task at hand. I'd like to make a case for evaluation and accountability personnel as being different. They are not classroom teachers on special assignment. They are not guidance counselors doing program evaluation and they are not principals who have retired from the battleground. They are competent specialists rather than generalists. They have probably received some specialized training or should receive such training to meet the information-providing needs of their position. More evaluators are now

being trained in the field, on-the-job, than in our graduate schools. Universities should be doing more to train evaluation personnel to work in the field. This could easily be a collaborative venture of universities, school systems and other interested agencies. It is essential to foster these collaborative relationships. There are evaluation activities and developmental tasks which are beyond the means of any of these institutions operating alone. Through a device such as we have used--the internship--personnel receive, in addition to their formal classroom training, on-the-job training and a reality orientation; and we receive a source of personnel, a recruiting mechanism and a major source of ideas.

Limited resources.--The most serious problem is that the evaluation office must have budgetary support for systematic evaluation. Information costs money--Up to one percent of total system budget has been recommended, similar to the R&D budgets of industry. The National School Boards Association has recommended that up to two percent of school system budgets be allocated to evaluation, research and development. The evaluation of special funded projects generally is more costly than the systematic evaluation performed for the system. A rule of thumb has been used in projects such as Title I for a range of 5 to 7 percent of the total project budget. I think it is important to stress that evaluation costs are also opportunity costs. You may save thousands of dollars over several years by having evaluative information about programs. You may avoid costly program investments with low payoffs, or be able to terminate or modify such programs before they become costly mistakes. We may then be able to maintain the public's confidence that a course of action being taken is the best of available strategies. Unfortunately, there is never enough money available

to satisfy the evaluation needs of decision-makers. Consequently, trade-offs must be made. One such trade-off might be the funded project which requires completion of forms with census counts and other related information, readily obtainable from a context data base operated by the evaluation office for the total school system. If this information is available, then it becomes possible for the evaluation personnel or the evaluation budget available to the project to be concentrated on other forms of evaluation--a more sophisticated process for monitoring evaluation, a more complete product evaluation which will in turn give local decision-makers more information and enable them to have a higher probability of success in the project attaining its goals. Unfortunately, funding sources often fail to see the wisdom in supporting evaluation which is not directly responding to the questions on their forms. Although we consider it necessary to meet the mandated evaluation requirements, such as completing state or federal level forms, we also find it essential to provide useful information to local decision-makers concerning the project--information which can be fed back to the community, and to all of the participants in the interest of improving the project and the outcomes of the project.

Necessary Level of Funding

Typically, state and federal government guidelines for specially funded programs or assisted projects call for an evaluation. However, guidelines fail to specify allowable amounts which can be expended upon evaluation, nor do the guidelines specify adequately the type of evaluation to be performed. Perhaps these shortcomings are due to the inability of evaluators themselves to specify general rules of thumb for establishing allowable

amounts of money required to evaluate and to specify the type of evaluation necessary in a certain situation.

What resolutions are possible in this dilemma? First, it is essential that school systems provide budgets for evaluation, particularly to maintain the context data base which will service the needs of the system and provide basic information for use by funded projects--and to place some value--through investment--on its activities. Secondly, it is necessary to identify for each project that information which must be provided to the funding source, whether it be state department or federal government--along with the cost of providing that information, whether that cost be specified in terms of full-time equivalent man-days or specified in terms of dollars. Then the means for providing information on the questions of local decision-makers, whether they be community people, board members, educators or other audiences, must be specified along with the cost of obtaining that information. The decision-maker, the people who have the responsibility and authority to allocate resources within the project, must then decide what information is necessary and assign priorities to that which has the greatest need. I believe that it is not only difficult but foolhardy at this point in the history of evaluation to begin to specify upper limits or even lower limits in terms of percentages of program budget which should be allocated to evaluation. It is more important to specify the information needs which are essential and important to the decision-makers, the decision-makers at the various levels: local, state and federal. There are small projects which, if carefully evaluated, have implications and potentials for application in many different settings. Obviously, this type of situation may well require a much higher percentage of the budget to be expended upon evaluation

than a situation where a large project is operating if it has operated for a number of years and most of the important questions have been answered. A manufacturing analogy might be appropriate in this situation. A new product of an R&D enterprise would be very carefully studied upon many criterion variables. For example, product shelf life may be very important. Product stability, product life under normal use, and product failure are all important aspects of tests which would be run in a laboratory and in reality settings on new products. Once this information has been established and adjustments have been made in the product and in the manufacturing process, then evaluation becomes a matter of quality control or product fidelity, such that we are sure we are getting the same product under the same conditions every time. This is to say that a new project on a start-up operation will require different kinds of evaluation to provide different kinds of information to the decision-makers, and that once a project reaches a point of stability and desirability, the matter of quality control or process evaluation then becomes important, to be accomplished by monitoring the process.

This discussion has centered on the purpose and problems of internal departments of evaluation. It should be evident that internal departments can meet the needs of funding agencies as well as service to local education agency decision-makers. They have the added advantage of providing for continuity and building a cumulative asset in the local agency. Proponents of external evaluation attack the competence of local education agencies to perform adequate evaluations. However, with the same specified levels of support, and with specifications for performance, LEA evaluation offices can be as

competent or more competent than the external agency. Systematic starvation for resources will create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is proposed that funding agencies, in addition to requiring evaluation and information also provide that adequate funds be made available to support the costs of evaluation and information. It is further proposed that the U.S. Office of Education support the development of evaluation capabilities in local education agencies for the evaluation of local education agency programs and their attendant information needs. Such support can and should be tied into proposed NIE activities, as well as federally supported projects, such as Title I, ESEA.

This proposal would strengthen LEA competencies, avoid the creation of another institution--the external evaluator--and meet the needs of funding agency decision-makers and LEA decision-makers. This proposal would enable us to provide for something to be tested in the LEA rather than discarding it without an adequate test of its viability.